

Netanyahu claims Israel will control all of Gaza after latest offensive



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during a news conference in Jerusalem
[Ronen Zvulun/Reuters]

Tel Aviv, May 22 (RHC)-- The entire Gaza Strip will be under the Israeli military's control at the end of its latest offensive, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says in his first news conference since December, setting out maximalist conditions for ending the devastating war on the besieged Palestinian enclave.

Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed in relentless Israeli bombardments across Gaza in recent days, at least 82 since dawn Wednesday, as starvation takes hold and only a small amount of aid trucks is allowed in with the blockade in effect in place.

Netanyahu also said on Wednesday that if "there is an opportunity for a temporary ceasefire and hostage exchange deal, Israel will be open to it."

The Israeli leader laid out the following conditions for ending the war: the release of all captives, the disarmament of Hamas, the exile of its leadership and the possibility of carrying on a plan outlined by United States President Donald Trump in February that would expel Palestinians from Gaza.

Trump has said the U.S. should run Gaza and transform the territory into the "Riviera of the Middle East". This is the first time Trump's plan has been mentioned by Netanyahu as one of the conditions to halt fighting. Multiple nations and rights groups have called the plan ethnic cleansing.

Netanyahu said Israel should avoid a "humanitarian crisis to preserve our freedom of operational action", referring to Israel's decision to allow a very limited number of humanitarian aid trucks into Gaza. He also referenced a much-criticised plan "developed with the U.S." to distribute food in the enclave without Hamas taking control of it. The Palestinian group denies it takes aid.

Israel has come under international pressure to halt its punishing total blockade on Gaza, which had prevented any food or aid trucks from entering the territory since March 2.

That has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian catastrophe inside the enclave. A United Nations-backed Integrated Food Security Phase Classification assessment found more than 93 percent of children in Gaza, or about 930,000, are on the brink of famine.

On Wednesday, the Israeli army said it allowed 100 aid trucks carrying flour, baby food and medical equipment into Gaza. Yet UN officials said distribution problems had meant no aid had so far reached people in need.

"The limited supplies finally being allowed to enter Kerem Shalom [in Arabic, the Karem Abu Salem border crossing] are nowhere near enough to meet the needs in Gaza, which are vast, which are tremendous. Much, much more aid needs to get in," said Stephane Dujarric, the UN chief's spokesperson.

Aid groups have said the amount of aid that Israel is allowing is not nearly enough, calling Netanyahu's efforts a "smokescreen to pretend the siege is over".

"The Israeli authorities' decision to allow a ridiculously inadequate amount of aid into Gaza after months of an air-tight siege signals their intention to avoid the accusation of starving people in Gaza while, in fact, keeping them barely surviving," said Pascale Coissard, the emergency coordinator in Khan Younis for Doctors Without Borders.

'A pressured, obsessed, lying man'

Critics were swift in reacting to Netanyahu's news conference. His "words today mean the occupation of Gaza for many years and waking up every day to the death of soldiers," opposition leader Yair Lapid said, adding that the country's international standing would collapse and the economy would be severely damaged.

“I saw a presentation by a pressured, obsessed, lying man who takes no responsibility for anything,” the Democrats party leader Yair Golan said after the news conference. “I will sue you for defamation because of the lies you spread about me, and we will defeat you in the elections very soon and send you to the pages of history.”

Netanyahu had slammed Golan on Tuesday after the opposition leader had said, “A sane country ... does not kill babies as a hobby.” Netanyahu called the comment “appalling.”

[SOURCE: REUTERS and NEWS AGENCIES]

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